

Bishop claims Iran visit helped to release hikers

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The release in September of U.S. hikers Shane Bauer and Joshua Fattal from an Iranian prison "affirms the importance of the role of religious dialogue and its end product in this case, public diplomacy," according to Episcopal bishop John Chane of Washington, D.C.

A delegation of Christian and Muslim leaders had traveled to Iran at the invitation of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to "seek ways to define common ground between our two countries," as Chane put it. One objective of the weeklong trip was to seek the release of the hikers on humanitarian grounds, reported Episcopal News Service.

The delegation, which returned September 19, included Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, former leader of the Archdiocese of Washington, and Nihad Awad and Larry Shaw, national executive director and board chairman respectively of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR).

Chane said September 21 that the hikers' release "reaffirms the promises made during our conversations with the president of Iran and representatives of the Iranian foreign ministry. . . . I look forward to good conversations with representatives of our government with the hope that it finds a way to address the Iranians' concern for their citizens who are currently in detention in the United States."

In reporting on the two men's freedom, however, U.S. newspapers tended to point to the political rivalries within Iran. Ahmadinejad had vowed to release the 29-year-old men before his scheduled speech to the UN General Assembly. Iranian

judges rejected the Iranian president's plan at the last minute, but \$1 million in bail from the Gulf state of Oman, a U.S. ally, appeared to play a part in the events, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Bauer

and Fattal were arrested, along with Sarah Shourd, on July 31, 2009, and accused of spying. Shourd was released on bail in September 2010 for medical reasons and left Iran. In August, Bauer and Fattal were sentenced to eight years in prison.

CAIR's Awad said the interfaith delegation's trip to Iran offered "a positive example of bridge-building initiatives." —ENInews